AFB American Foundation® for the Blind

Expanding possibilities for people with vision loss

Women's Suffrage Centennial Celebration

Exploring the Activism of Helen Keller

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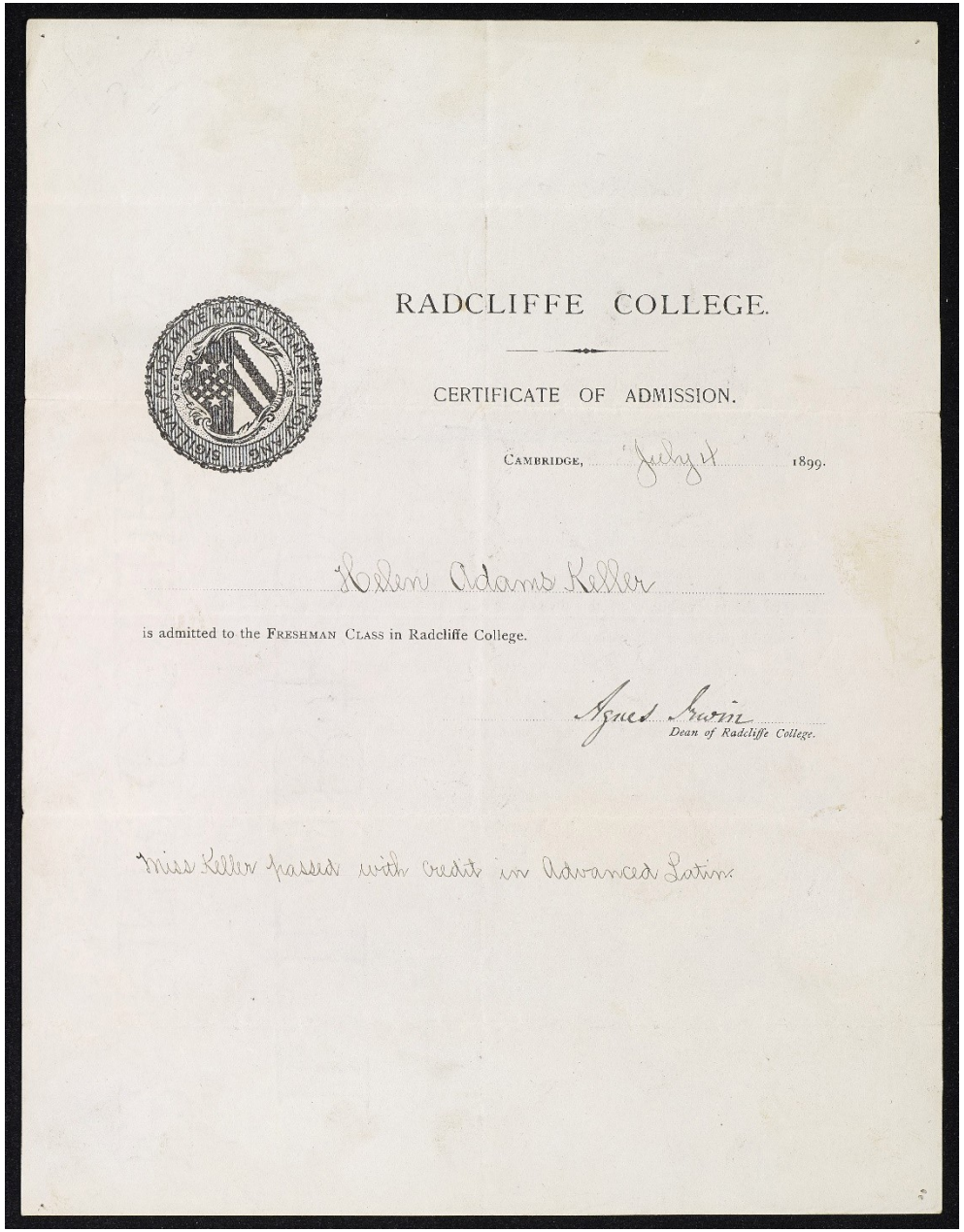
EDUCATION

Teacher and pupil: Anne Sullivan and Helen Keller, circa 1894

Out of the Ordinary: Helen and Annie sitting in a tree, Wrentham, MA, 1904

Certificate of Admission to Radcliffe College, 1900



RADCLIFFE COLLEGE.

CERTIFICATE OF ADMISSION.

CAMBRIDGE, July 1st 1899.

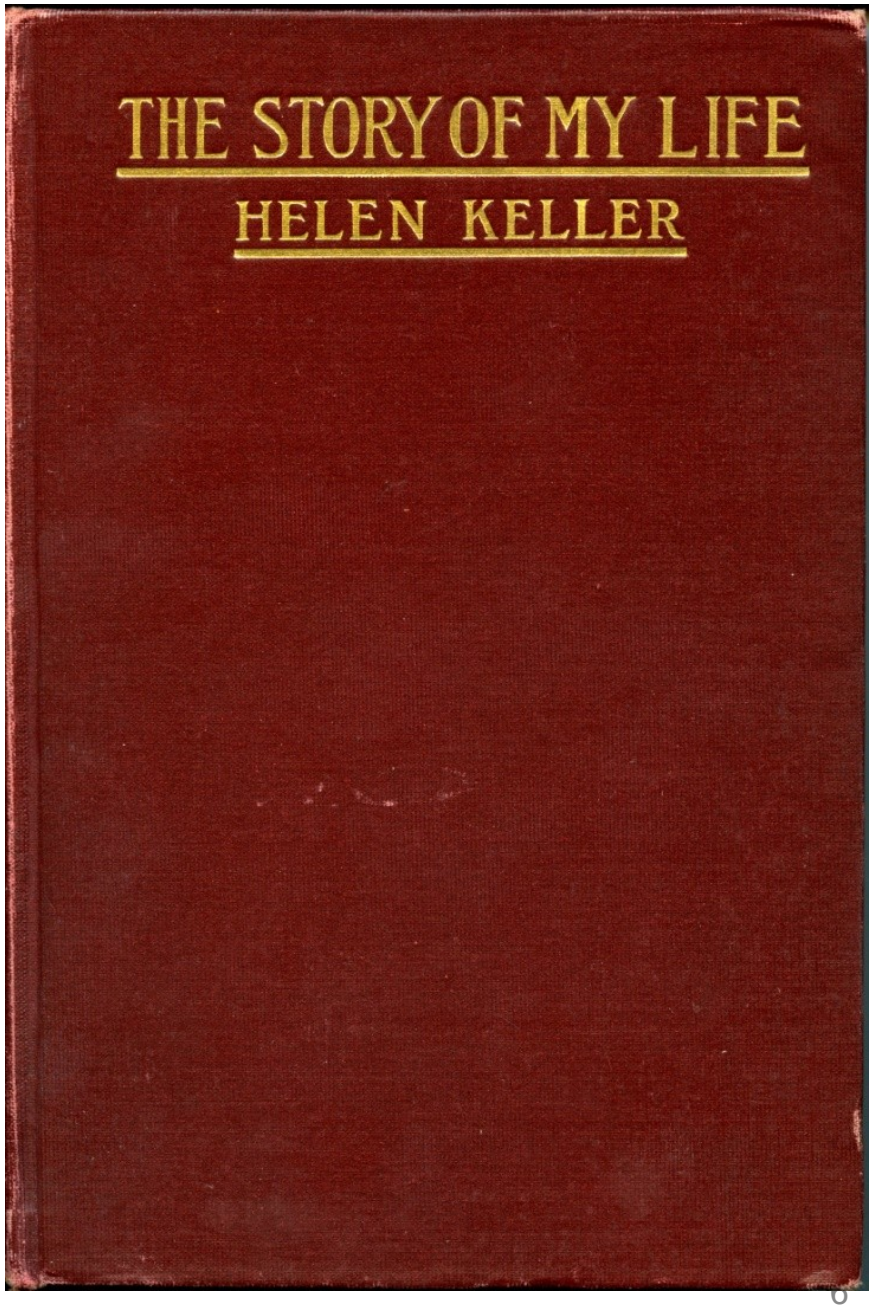
Helen Adams Keller

is admitted to the FRESHMAN CLASS in Radcliffe College.

Agnes Irwin
Dean of Radcliffe College.

Miss Keller passed with credit in Advanced Latin.

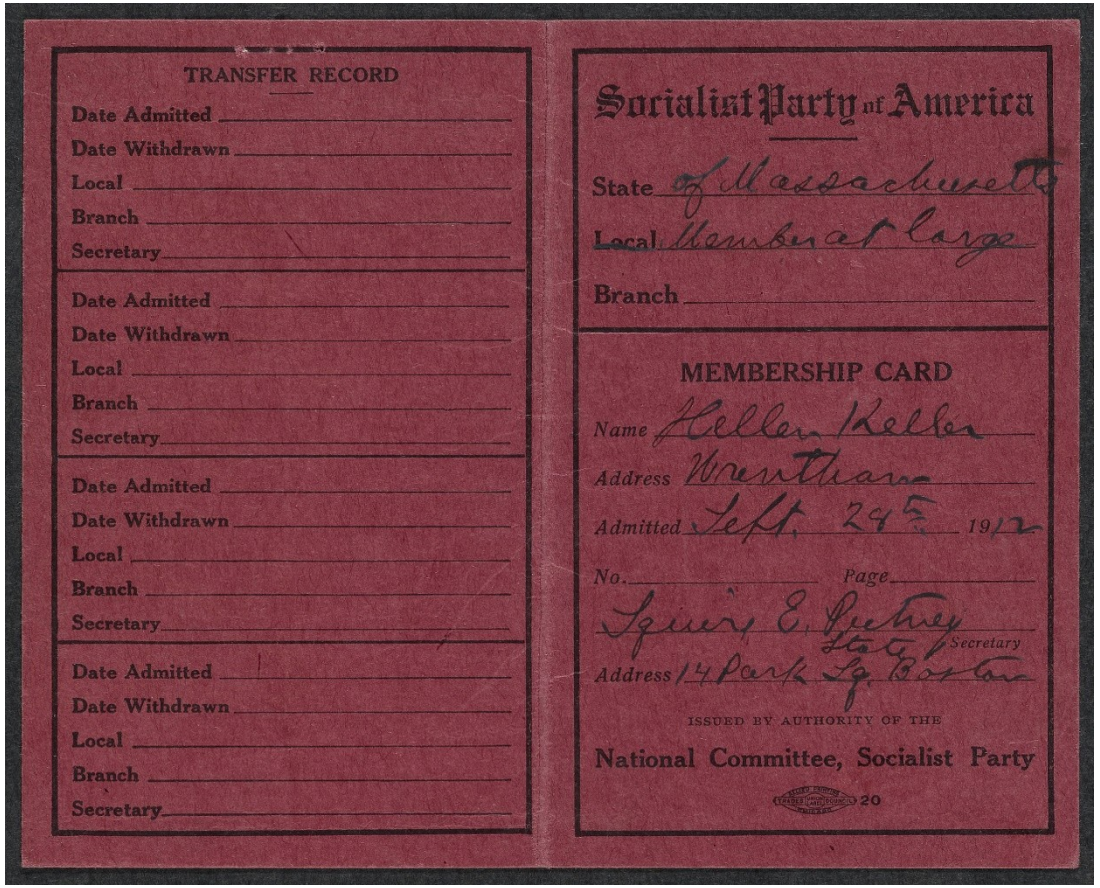
Helen’s 1902 autobiography
The Story of My Life

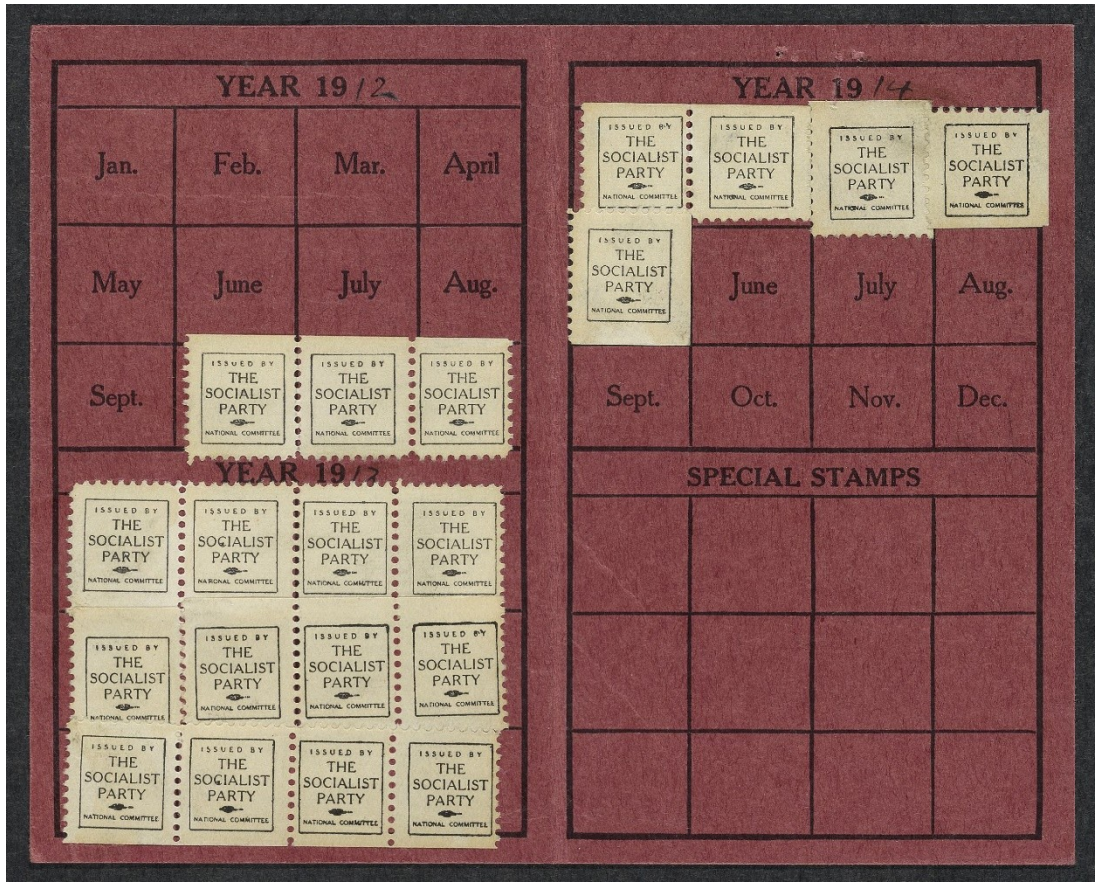


At home in Wrentham, MA, 1914: Helen, John Macy and Anne Sullivan Macy.

SOCIALISM

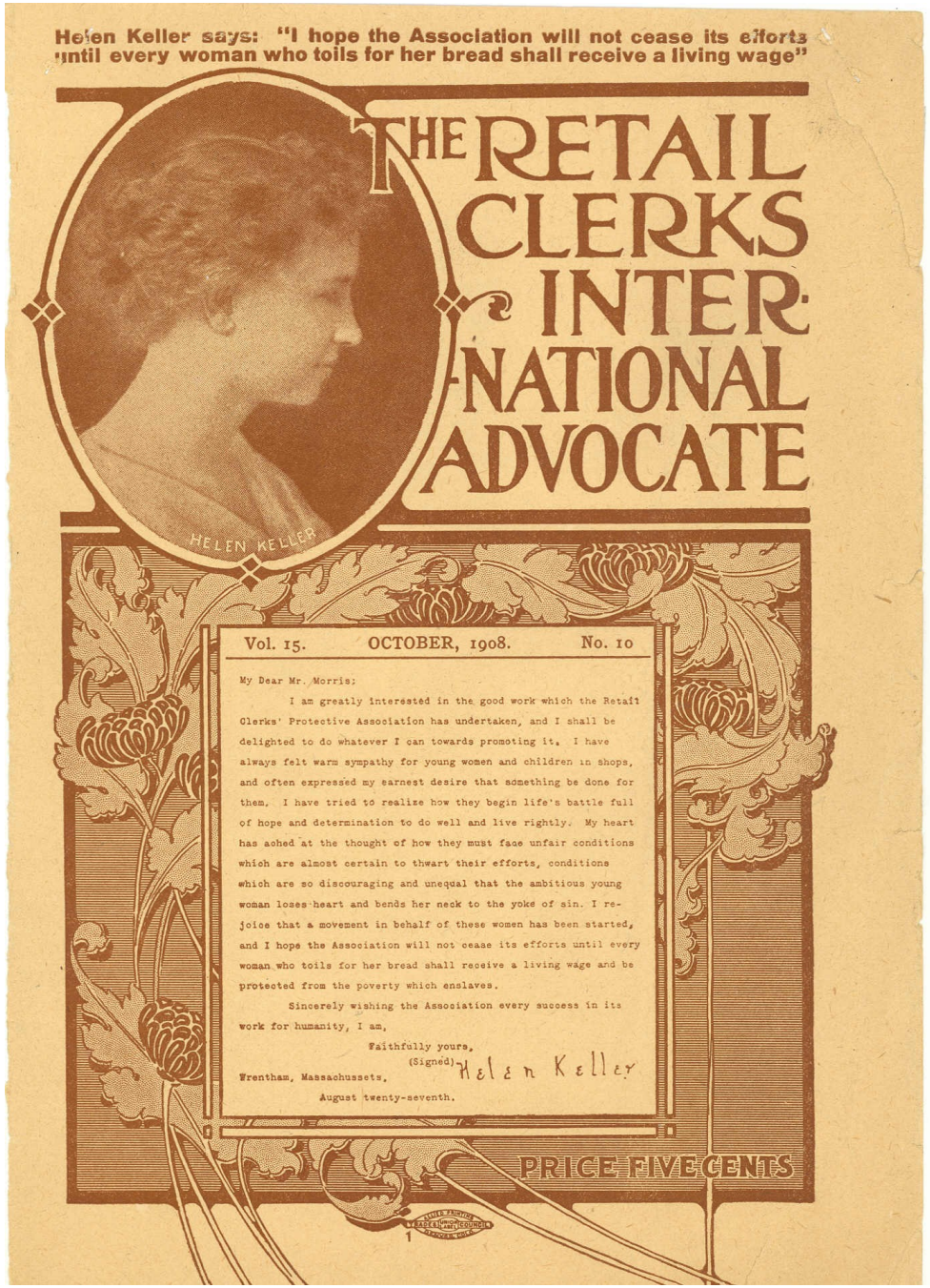
Early Politics: Helen's 1912-1914 Socialist Party membership card





Helen Keller to the Retail Clerks' Protective Association, 1908

"..I hope the Association will not cease its efforts until every woman who toils for her bread shall receive a living wage and be protected from


Helen Keller says: "I hope the Association will not cease its efforts until every woman who toils for her bread shall receive a living wage"
THE RETAIL CLERKS INTERNATIONAL ADVOCATE
HELEN KELLER
Vol. 15. OCTOBER, 1908. No. 10
My Dear Mr. Morris:
I am greatly interested in the good work which the Retail Clerks' Protective Association has undertaken, and I shall be delighted to do whatever I can towards promoting it. I have always felt warm sympathy for young women and children in shops, and often expressed my earnest desire that something be done for them. I have tried to realize how they begin life's battle full of hope and determination to do well and live rightly. My heart has ached at the thought of how they must face unfair conditions which are almost certain to thwart their efforts, conditions which are so discouraging and unequal that the ambitious young woman loses heart and bends her neck to the yoke of sin. I rejoice that a movement in behalf of these women has been started, and I hope the Association will not cease its efforts until every woman who toils for her bread shall receive a living wage and be protected from the poverty which enslaves.
Sincerely wishing the Association every success in its work for humanity, I am,
Faithfully yours,
(Signed) Helen Keller
Wrentham, Massachussets,
August twenty-seventh.
PRICE FIVE CENTS

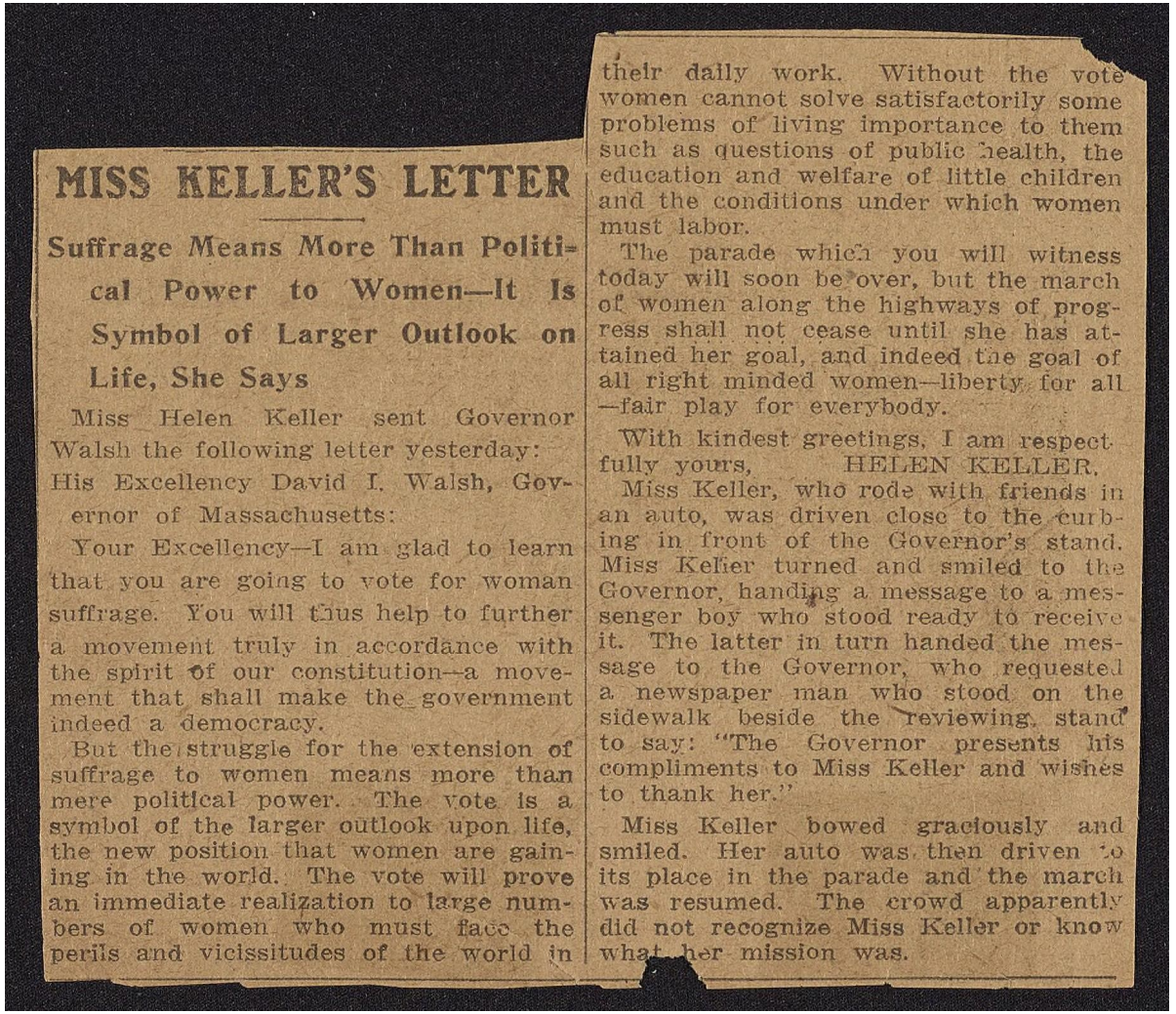
WOMEN’S SUFFRAGE

“The majority of mankind are working-people. So long as their fair demands – the ownership and control of their lives and of their livelihood – are set at naught, we can have neither men’s rights

Women's Suffrage Demonstration, March 3rd, 1913, Washington D.C.

Photograph: National Archives, Washington D.C.

Publication of a letter written by Helen Keller to the Governor of Massachusetts and hand delivered during a suffrage parade, 1915



MISS KELLER'S LETTER

Suffrage Means More Than Political Power to Women—It Is Symbol of Larger Outlook on Life, She Says

Miss Helen Keller sent Governor Walsh the following letter yesterday:

His Excellency David I. Walsh, Governor of Massachusetts:

Your Excellency—I am glad to learn that you are going to vote for woman suffrage. You will thus help to further a movement truly in accordance with the spirit of our constitution—a movement that shall make the government indeed a democracy.

But the struggle for the extension of suffrage to women means more than mere political power. The vote is a symbol of the larger outlook upon life, the new position that women are gaining in the world. The vote will prove an immediate realization to large numbers of women who must face the perils and vicissitudes of the world in their daily work. Without the vote women cannot solve satisfactorily some problems of living importance to them such as questions of public health, the education and welfare of little children and the conditions under which women must labor.

The parade which you will witness today will soon be over, but the march of women along the highways of progress shall not cease until she has attained her goal, and indeed the goal of all right minded women—liberty for all—fair play for everybody.

With kindest greetings, I am respectfully yours, HELEN KELLER.

Miss Keller, who rode with friends in an auto, was driven close to the curbing in front of the Governor's stand. Miss Keller turned and smiled to the Governor, handing a message to a messenger boy who stood ready to receive it. The latter in turn handed the message to the Governor, who requested a newspaper man who stood on the sidewalk beside the reviewing stand to say: "The Governor presents his compliments to Miss Keller and wishes to thank her."

Miss Keller bowed graciously and smiled. Her auto was then driven to its place in the parade and the march was resumed. The crowd apparently did not recognize Miss Keller or know what her mission was.

Men are never so absurd as when they urge the inferiority of women.” Helen Keller, Chicago, June 11, 1916

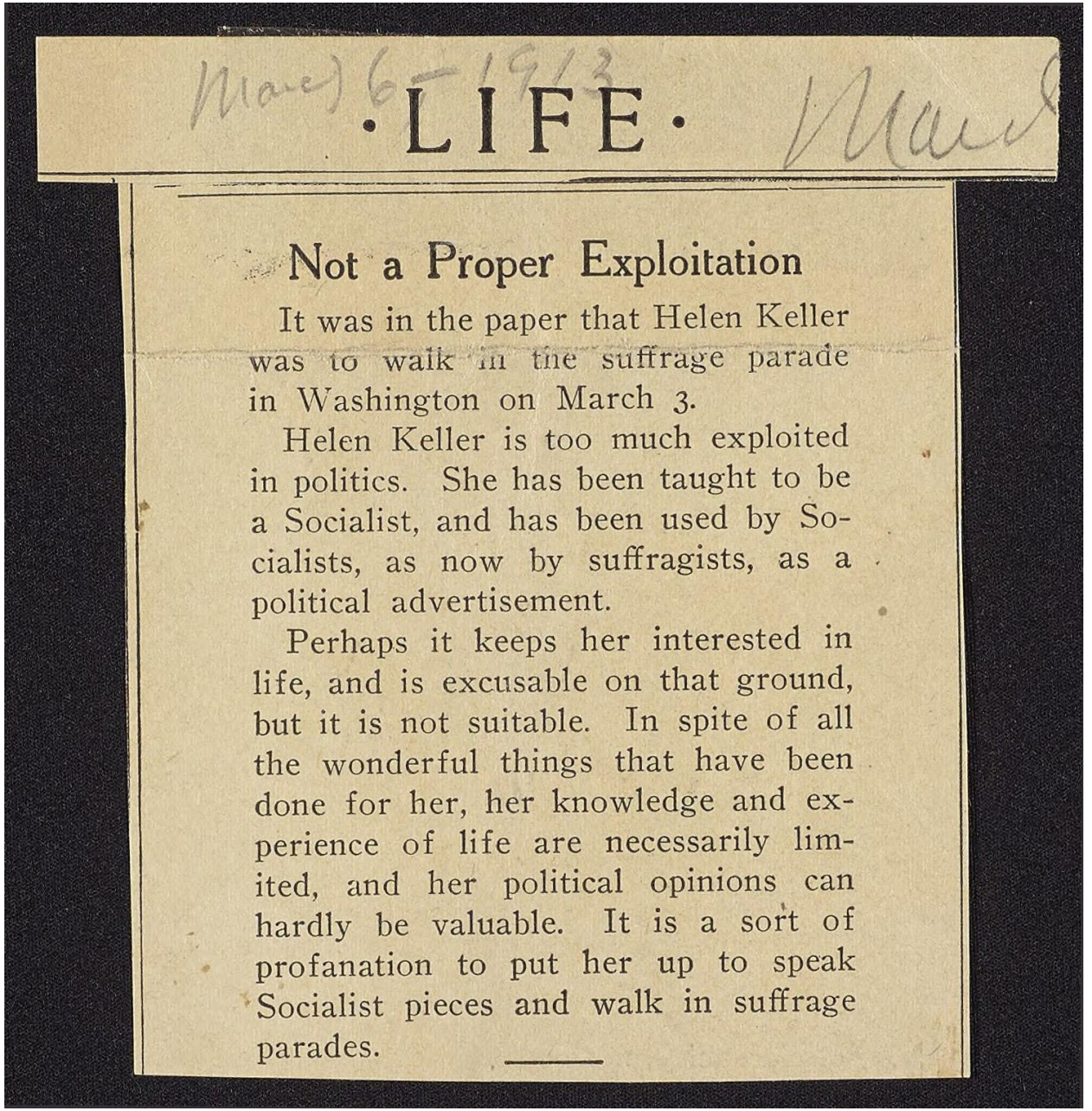
Photograph: Chicago Tribune, 1916

I’m not greatly interested in the ballot for women – or for men either for that matter.”

“There are no such things as “divine, immutable, inalienable rights.” Rights are things which we get when we are strong enough to make our claim to them good. Today women are asserting their rights tomorrow nobody will be foolhardy enough to

MODERN WOMAN

"In spite of all the wonderful things that have been done for her, her knowledge and experience of life are necessarily limited, and her political opinions can hardly be valuable." LIFE, March 6, 1913



March 6 1913

·LIFE·

Not a Proper Exploitation

It was in the paper that Helen Keller was to walk in the suffrage parade in Washington on March 3.

Helen Keller is too much exploited in politics. She has been taught to be a Socialist, and has been used by Socialists, as now by suffragists, as a political advertisement.

Perhaps it keeps her interested in life, and is excusable on that ground, but it is not suitable. In spite of all the wonderful things that have been done for her, her knowledge and experience of life are necessarily limited, and her political opinions can hardly be valuable. It is a sort of profanation to put her up to speak Socialist pieces and walk in suffrage parades.

“Modern Girl Isn’t Bad; Just Restless, Blind Genius Declares – Give her Freedom and Sympathy And She Will Make World Proud of Her”

Colorado, 1925

DENVER POST
DENVER COLO.
Feb. 22 1925.
Denver, Colo.

HELEN KELLER WELCOMED TO DENVER ON MISSION FOR BLIND

In the upper picture Miss Keller and her teacher, Mrs. Anna Macy Sullivan, are shown with the reception committee which greeted them at the Union station. Left to right are—Mrs. R. C. Campbell, Mrs. Owen E. LeFevre, Mrs. Sullivan, Mayor Stapleton, Miss Keller, Miss Polite Thompson and Harry Lamb.
The lower picture is a close-up of Miss Keller being welcomed to Denver by Mayor Stapleton.

MODERN GIRL'S ALL RIGHT, SAYS HELEN KELLER

last column bottom

(Continued From ... column)

they do. There is nothing else to look to. The idealism of youth is what gives older folks the courage to go on. The remedy, if one is needed to bring youth back into the traditional path of obedience to older wills, something useful to do.

"Girls will never be happy until they learn to be useful in the world. But they will grow up in time, and they are dear anyway, sweet and pretty and young, and—I love them so. They cannot learn too early to do something worth while. If they have that idea in mind, they will be ready to take their place in the world.

"Patience and sympathy are necessary in dealing, or rather going with them, for it is wise companionship they need as they pass thru the temptations of today—companionship and freedom. We all need freedom."

The strong, white hands of Helen Keller were lifted in a wing-like gesture as she uttered that word, freedom. Then she asked "Is there anything so glorious in the world as freedom?"

And, as I thought, "Who has so great a right to ask that question as she who has achieved a freedom beyond that defined by mortal man?" I asked Mrs. Macy if it were easier to understand Helen Keller from the standpoint of reincarnation; as the composite of all the Adams and Eves of ... and other distinguished ancestors and the race, or to regard her as completing another's existence?

"EVERYONE IS BLEND OF RACIAL MEMORIES."

... like a flash, the question was ... off to the sightless listener.

"Each composite," she answered ... "of all that has been and ... and hoped and suffered and ... the human race. We all ... If it each comes into the ... fresh mind and the ...

WORK IS FLAPPER'S REAL NEED, SAYS HELEN KELLER

Modern Girl Isn't Bad; Just Restless, Blind Genius Declares—Give Her Freedom and Sympathy And She Will Make World Proud of Her.

(By FRANCES WAYNE.)

A human being walled in by darkness and silence, yet—

So in love with life and living as to be comparable to a happy, healthy child; so informed of men and measures as to resemble a most thoroly equipped information bureau.

So deeply versed in literature and ... poetry, science and philosophy as to ... be fitted to argue with wise men in the temple; so tolerant, hopeful and ...

... seeds ... of his own ... why each child born into ... lives in such a thrill as ... its sweet, baby softness an ... the mystery of it.

"I am the ages and the race ... myself at the same time. I am ... ind being, and my ... make the most of each ... each hour and each year ... make my contribution to ... sum worthy of my op... tunity.

A friend brought a sheaf of roses ... laid them in the hands of Helen ... Keller. She said, "Oh! Thanks and ... thanks!" And asked, "Is there anything more lovely than a rose, unless ... be a baby?"

Which question was a cue for another:

"Does the vibration of sound or of color mean the most to you?"

"I know what sound is," she answered, "I imagine color. Then sound vibrations I receive joy from ... music. I hear the beating of the ... drums, the song of strings on viola ... and violin and 'cello. In my own ... way, I differentiate the instruments ... and their harmonies. I can tell the ... doings of the weather by sound vibrations; I feel the changing moods of ... people, and can tell when they move ... about the room or pass me out of ... doors. I enjoy the radio, tho it is ... most tantalizing at times. I prepare ... to listen to a concert and to enjoy it—then, pff! it goes!

"As for color, that with me is ... imaginary. I conceive color to be ... everything that is soft and sweet, ... like a baby's cheek.

SEES WORLD IN TERMS OF ODOR.

"Now, as to fragrance. That has a ... million suggestions. It gives me landscapes and sets me in wide, dim forests and orchards heavy with fruit ... and prairies of grain, and brings earth close to me. It makes everything ... quite lovely, like the immensity of ... Colorado's mountains. Fragrance sets ... me free to wander and explore; in its ... effect it is most like riding in the ... air."

That brought us to aviation, in which ... sport Miss Keller is an enthusiast. "To climb the wind is an experience ... which each should enjoy," she said. "To soar up and up thru illimitable ... space; to feel the floor of the world ... fall away while one goes searching ... for the sky and then, like a bird, to ... descend again. It means aspiration ... and reality combined."

Helen Keller is not easy to understand at times. Her thoughts rush ... of her technical delivery—to ... must be remembered that her ... as well as her voice are "made ... ches," made by the touch of her ... own fingers on another's lips; made ... a persistence of will that is be... and the average imagination to con... ceive.

Thirty-nine years of devoted service ... as Anna Sullivan Macy given to the ... business of linking Helen Keller ... life and living. She has done her ... so well that unless one knew, one ... would be surprised to learn that the ... pupil is blind and deaf and had been ... dumb. There is none of the pitiful, ... helpless groping so conspicuous in the ... blind. Instead, there is a quality of ... self-reliance, a sureness of gesture and ... a facial expression indicating interest ... and anticipation, rather than stranded ... waiting.

Friday, at noon, Miss Keller and ... Mrs. Macy will be guests at a subscription luncheon at the Brown Palace hotel. Monday the legislature will ... be host to the distinguished visitor, ... and on March 2 she will speak at a ... meeting at the city auditorium. She ... wants the people of America to know ... what Mrs. Macy has meant to her, ... and, in turn, she wants the Helen ... Keller fund for the blind to do some... thing of the same sort for the less ... fortunate sightless ones of America.

... understanding as to be worthy to walk ... close beside the gentle One of Gali... lee; so eager to serve those who, like ... herself, are victims of evil circumstances, that she would gladly go to incarnation, of the thing psychics ... the stake to achieve her desire ... scientists call "vibrations," of all ... their behalf—

That is Helen Keller, who has arrived in Denver on a cross country ... tour in behalf of the Helen Keller ... fund for the American Foundation of ... the Blind.

Tall, robust in figure, smartly ... gowned in black velvet, her intelligent face glowing with a smile of ... welcome, Helen Keller sat in ... room at the Brown Palace hotel Wednesday and talked of many things ...

... personified by the flapper, of ... incarnation, of the thing psychics ... planing, and of life in general and ... Colorado in particular.

By her side, relaying questions ... touch of fingers to palm, sat Miss ... Anna Sullivan Macy, the teacher and ... friend whose wisdom unlocked the ... prison and set the spirit of her ... free.

"There is much discussion," Helen Keller said in ... of the so-called defiant ... hope of the world.

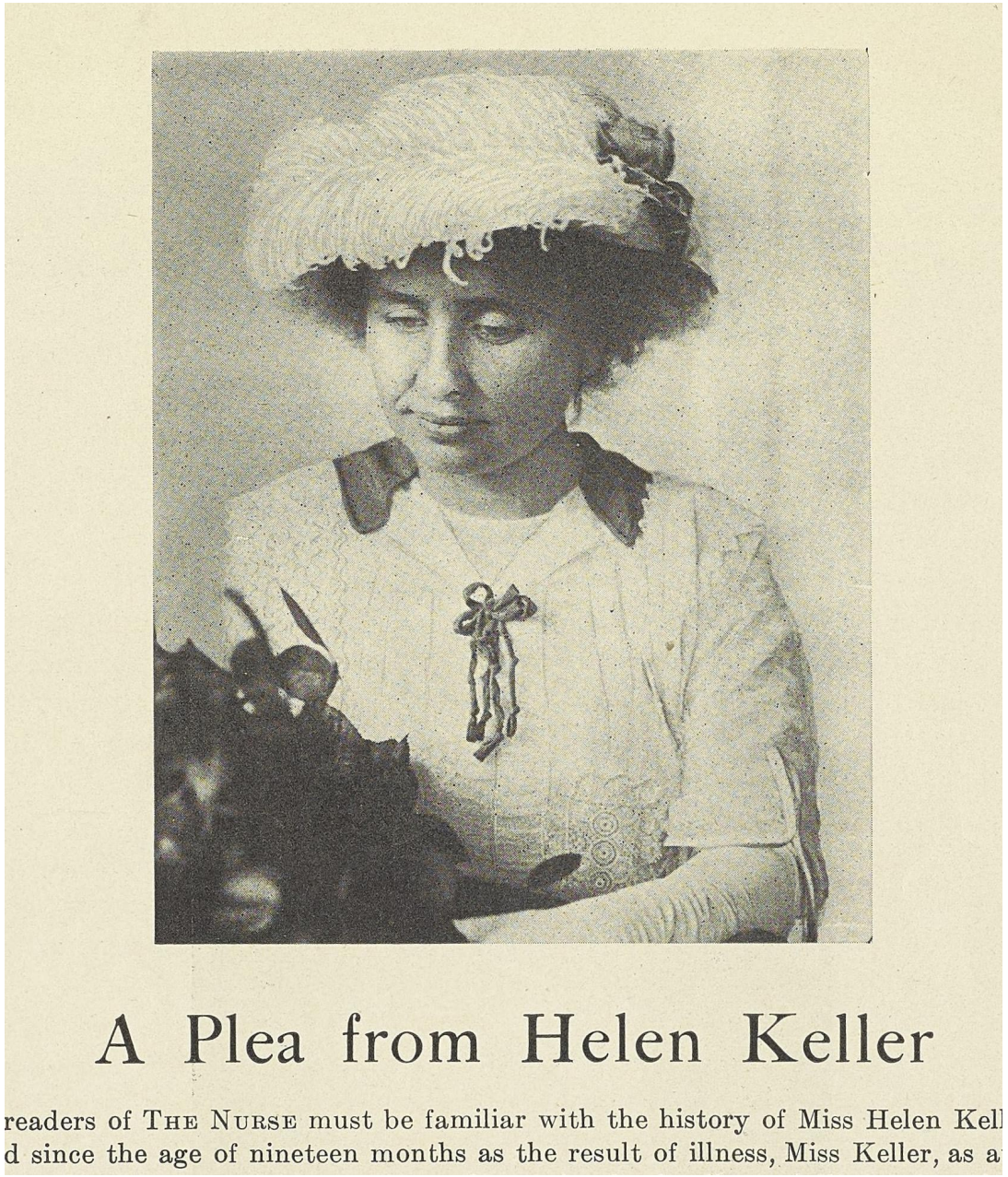
continued

“I really care for nothing in the world but liberty in all the departments of life - liberty to grow mentally and spiritually, untramelled by tradition and arbitrary standards.” 1928

The Fighting Bobs:
Helen Keller is pictured on the far right, 1924

THE FIGHTING BOBS
THE FIGHTING BOBS
Left—"THE FIGHTING BOBS" is a national organization of men and women who are campaigning for the La Follette-Wheeler third party ticket. Members gave a luncheon yesterday at the Cafe Boulevard in honor of Mr. La Follette. Photograph shows three of speakers. Left to right, Morris Hillquit, "Adjutant" of "The Fighting Bobs"; Miss Margaret Vale, "National Commander," and Miss Helen Keller, the famous blind girl, who is "Colonel" for New York City. Staff Photo—Steffen

“They are seized with a spasm of modesty when anyone tries to discuss this subject sensibly.” 1914



A Plea from Helen Keller

readers of The Nurse must be familiar with the history of Miss Helen Kell
d since the age of nineteen months as the result of illness, Miss Keller, as a

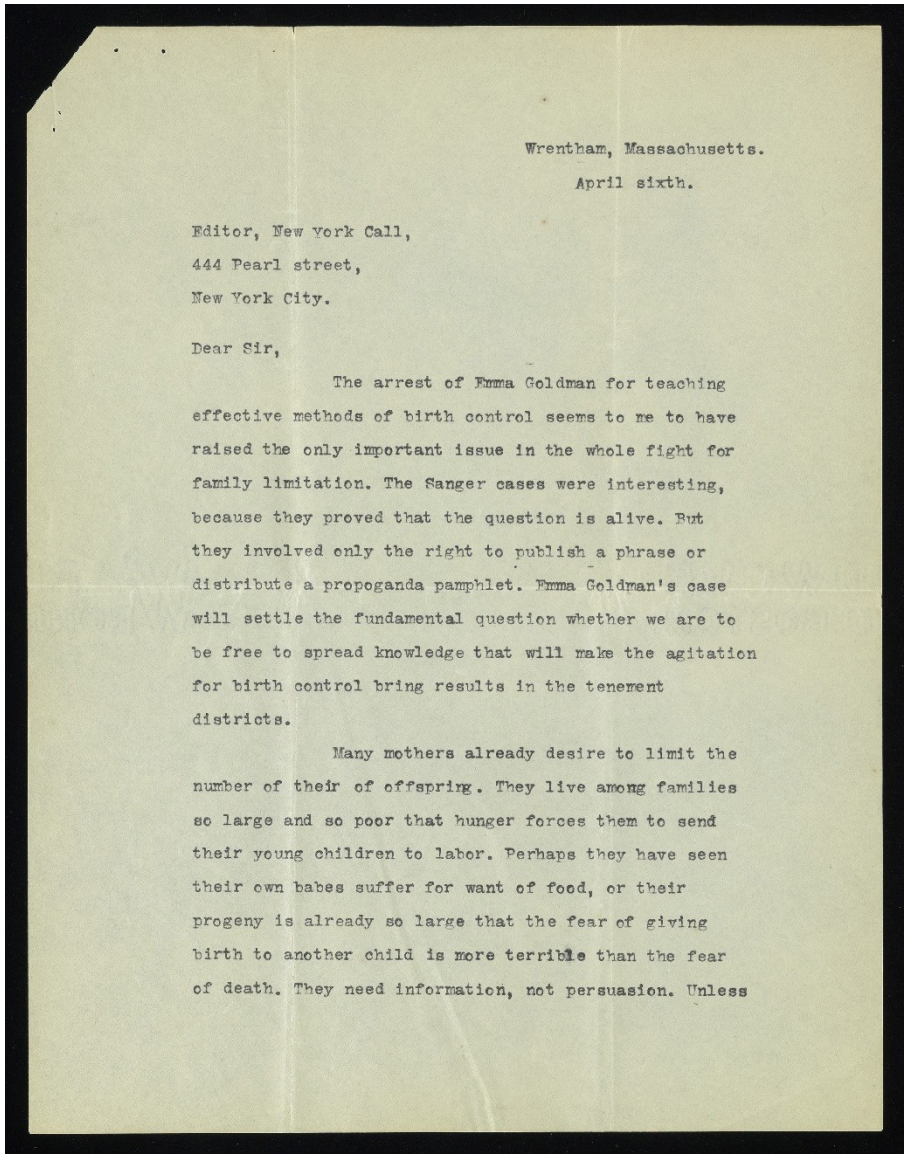
Advocate for the Poor

Image by Rudolf Duhrkoop, circa 1900

Image by Hiram Myers, circa 1917

Birth Control for Women in the Tenements

"..Does anyone suppose that the infrequency of the stork's visits among them is caused by the superior moral restraint of the well-to-do?.."
New York Call, 1916



Wrentham, Massachusetts.
April sixth.

Editor, New York Call,
444 Pearl street,
New York City.

Dear Sir,

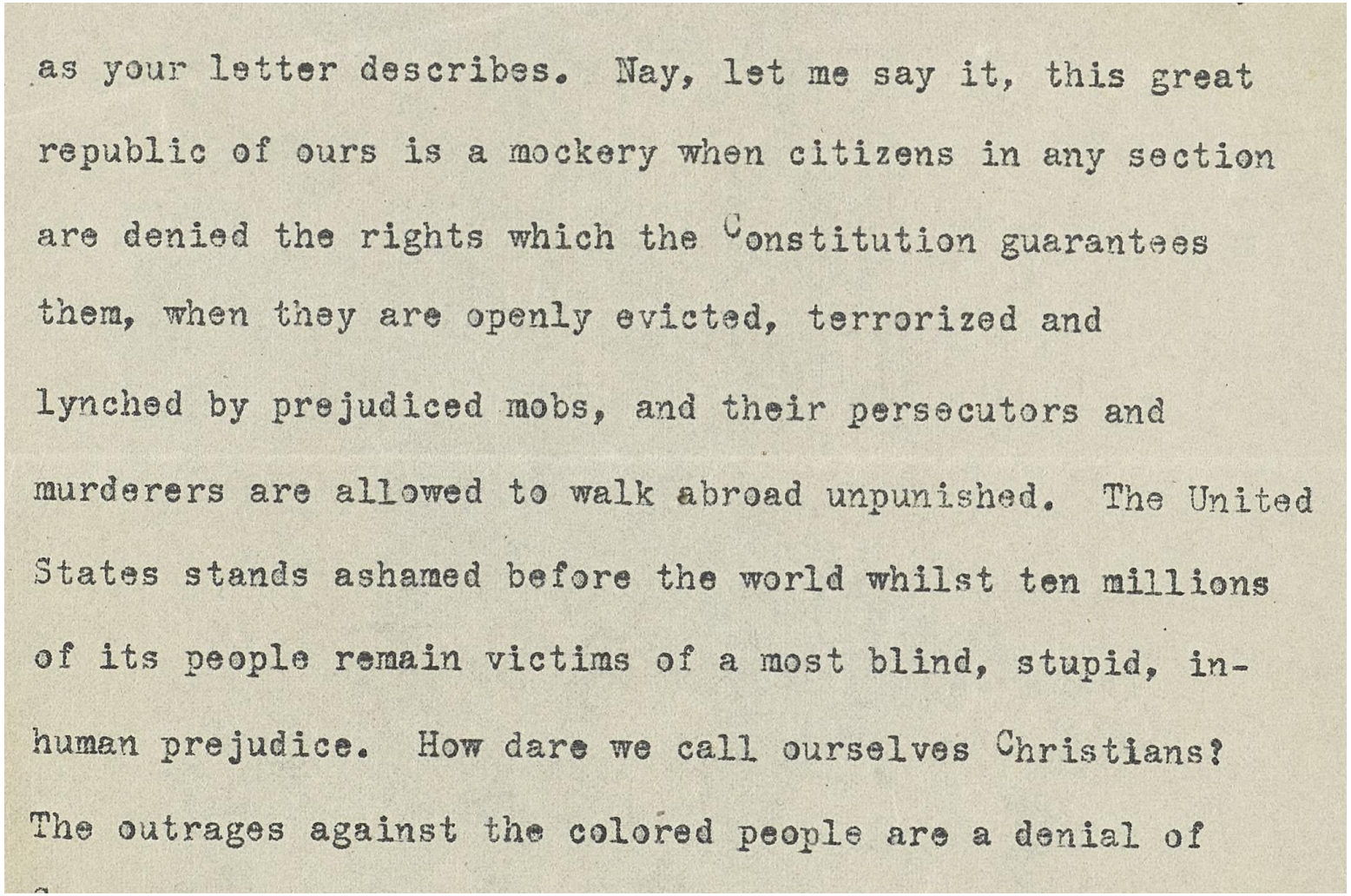
The arrest of Emma Goldman for teaching effective methods of birth control seems to me to have raised the only important issue in the whole fight for family limitation. The Sanger cases were interesting, because they proved that the question is alive. But they involved only the right to publish a phrase or distribute a propoganda pamphlet. Emma Goldman's case will settle the fundamental question whether we are to be free to spread knowledge that will make the agitation for birth control bring results in the tenement districts.

Many mothers already desire to limit the number of their of offspring. They live among families so large and so poor that hunger forces them to send their young children to labor. Perhaps they have seen their own babes suffer for want of food, or their progeny is already so large that the fear of giving birth to another child is more terrible than the fear of death. They need information, not persuasion. Unless

Planned Parenthood

Margaret Sanger (1879-1966)

Helen Keller to Oswald Garrison Villard, Vice-President, NAACP, 1916



as your letter describes. Nay, let me say it, this great republic of ours is a mockery when citizens in any section are denied the rights which the Constitution guarantees them, when they are openly evicted, terrorized and lynched by prejudiced mobs, and their persecutors and murderers are allowed to walk abroad unpunished. The United States stands ashamed before the world whilst ten millions of its people remain victims of a most blind, stupid, in-human prejudice. How dare we call ourselves Christians? The outrages against the colored people are a denial of

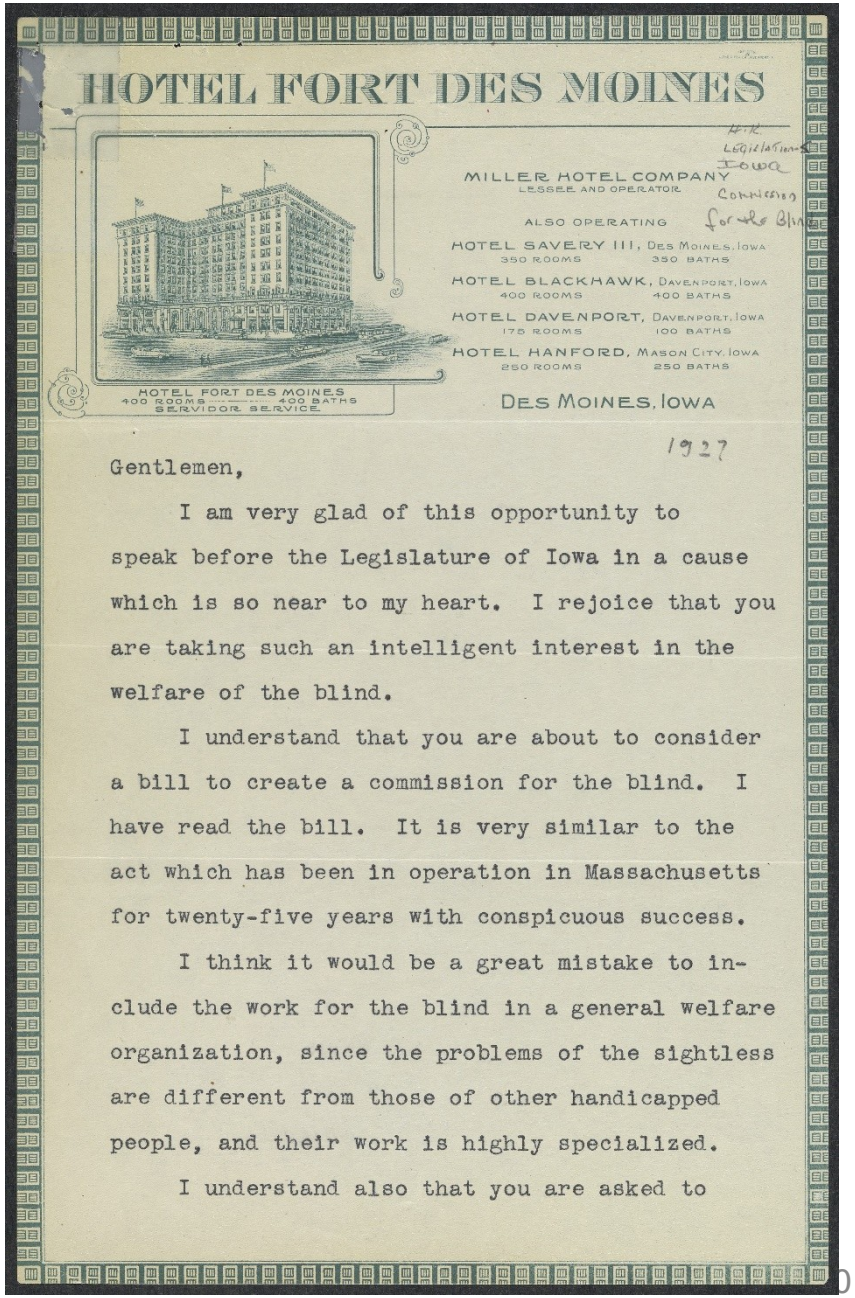
AMERICAN FOUNDATION FOR THE BLIND

The Pen is Mightier than the Sword

Helen Keller at home in Forest Hills, Long Island, NY, circa 1929

“Gentlemen, that is not enough.”

Helen’s address to the Legislature of Iowa, 1927



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1927

Gentlemen,

I am very glad of this opportunity to speak before the Legislature of Iowa in a cause which is so near to my heart. I rejoice that you are taking such an intelligent interest in the welfare of the blind.

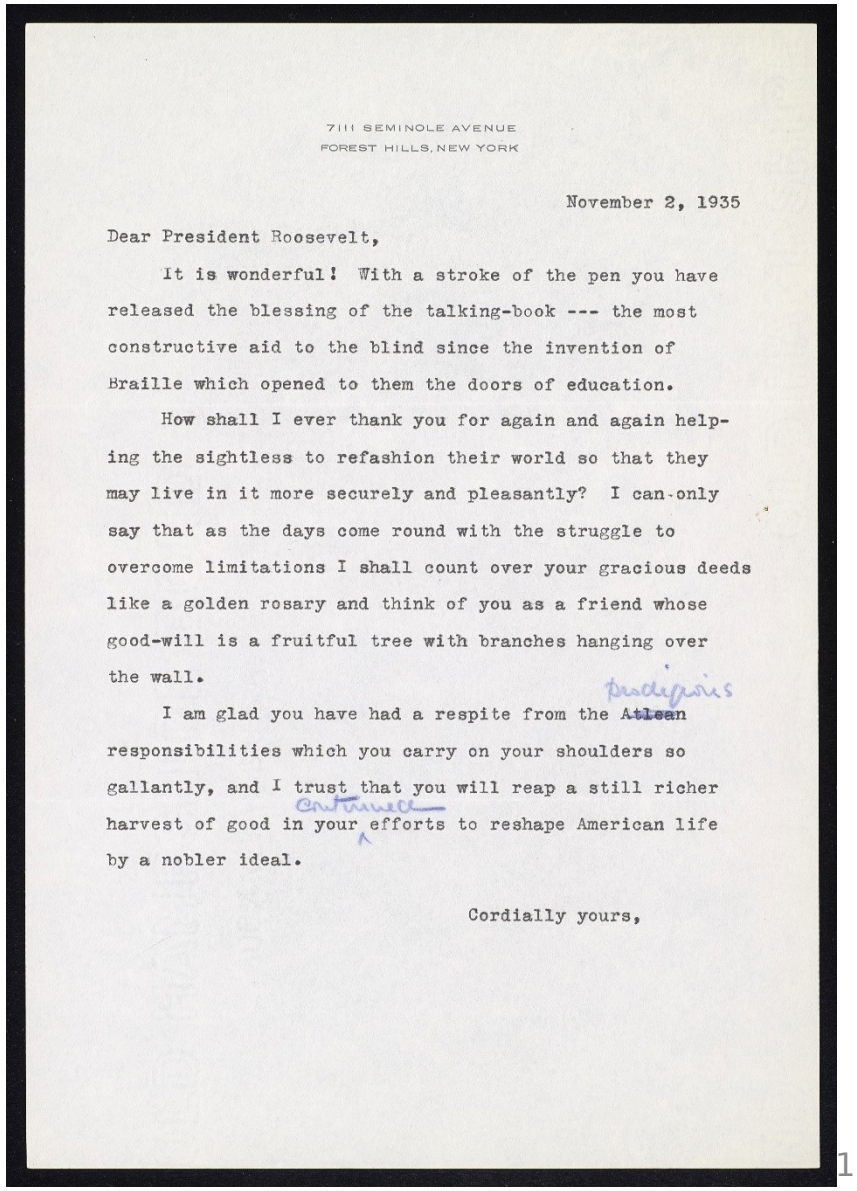
I understand that you are about to consider a bill to create a commission for the blind. I have read the bill. It is very similar to the act which has been in operation in Massachusetts for twenty-five years with conspicuous success.

I think it would be a great mistake to include the work for the blind in a general welfare organization, since the problems of the sightless are different from those of other handicapped people, and their work is highly specialized.

I understand also that you are asked to

The Talking Book

"It is wonderful! With a stroke of the pen you have released the blessing of the talking-book --- the most constructive aid to the blind since the invention of Braille which opened to them the doors of education." Helen Keller to President Franklin D.



7111 SEMINOLE AVENUE
FOREST HILLS, NEW YORK

November 2, 1935

Dear President Roosevelt,

It is wonderful! With a stroke of the pen you have released the blessing of the talking-book --- the most constructive aid to the blind since the invention of Braille which opened to them the doors of education.

How shall I ever thank you for again and again helping the sightless to refashion their world so that they may live in it more securely and pleasantly? I can only say that as the days come round with the struggle to overcome limitations I shall count over your gracious deeds like a golden rosary and think of you as a friend whose good-will is a fruitful tree with branches hanging over the wall.

I am glad you have had a respite from the Atlean responsibilities which you carry on your shoulders so gallantly, and I trust that you will reap a still richer harvest of good in your efforts to reshape American life by a nobler ideal.

Cordially yours,

Blazing the Trail

“Does the modern girl think for herself? Why should women make of themselves caricatures of men? If they would only cultivate their own individualities, how much more useful they would be, and how much happier!”

Vol. 10 No. 4 - Oct. 1934. Home Magazine

Blazing the TRAIL

“Does the modern girl think for herself?” is answered

By HELEN KELLER

Decoration by Robert Fawcett

THERE has been much argument lately among women, young and old, as to whether the enlarged opportunities and innumerable avenues of adventure open to them that were closed to their grandmothers have stimulated independence and self-expression.

I asked a man I know, “Do modern women think for themselves?” He replied, “Very few women have thought in any age. It is the same now as it always was. Everything depends on the few.” This answer faces both ways, and is not very satisfactory.

The gist of my personal observations is that, for the most part, American women imitate male psychology. They content themselves with doing what men do.

It seems to me, there is a field of enterprise which women have neglected, and in which they would meet with little or no competition from men—namely, civilizing themselves.

Why should women make of themselves caricatures of men? If they would only cultivate their own individualities, how much more useful they would be, and how much happier!

Would it not be worth while for women to make a stringent revision of their whole standard of values, and set off some of the stress on the claims of materialism and bring those of the other fundamental instincts into some kind of balance and harmony with them? Does the material life really offer enough to make it worth living even to those who dominate and shape it?

If women truly wish to promote a finer civilization, should they not take a quite different angle—*say, the spiritual angle?* For civilization is an affair of the spirit, and, in the realm of the spirit, organization and getting and spending money count for very little. I only ask whether women would not be happier if something of the sort happened within them.

If women’s freedom and greater opportunities are to prove a blessing to humanity, they must work from an inner consciousness.

Then perhaps we should see the beginning of a humane and reasonable society—a society which has work to do that is of real value, a mind unafraid to travel, even though the trail be not blazed, a genuine pleasure in the arts, now and then *a sight of the eternal hills and a sense of the presence of God.*

If women truly wish to promote a finer civilization, should they not take a quite different angle—let us say, the spiritual angle?

Over 90 Military Hospitals between 1944 and 1946

Helen and Polly Thomson with veterans at the McCloskey Military Hospital, Texas, 1944

Global Advocate for People with Disabilities

Helen and Polly Thomson, Mumbai Airport, India, 1955

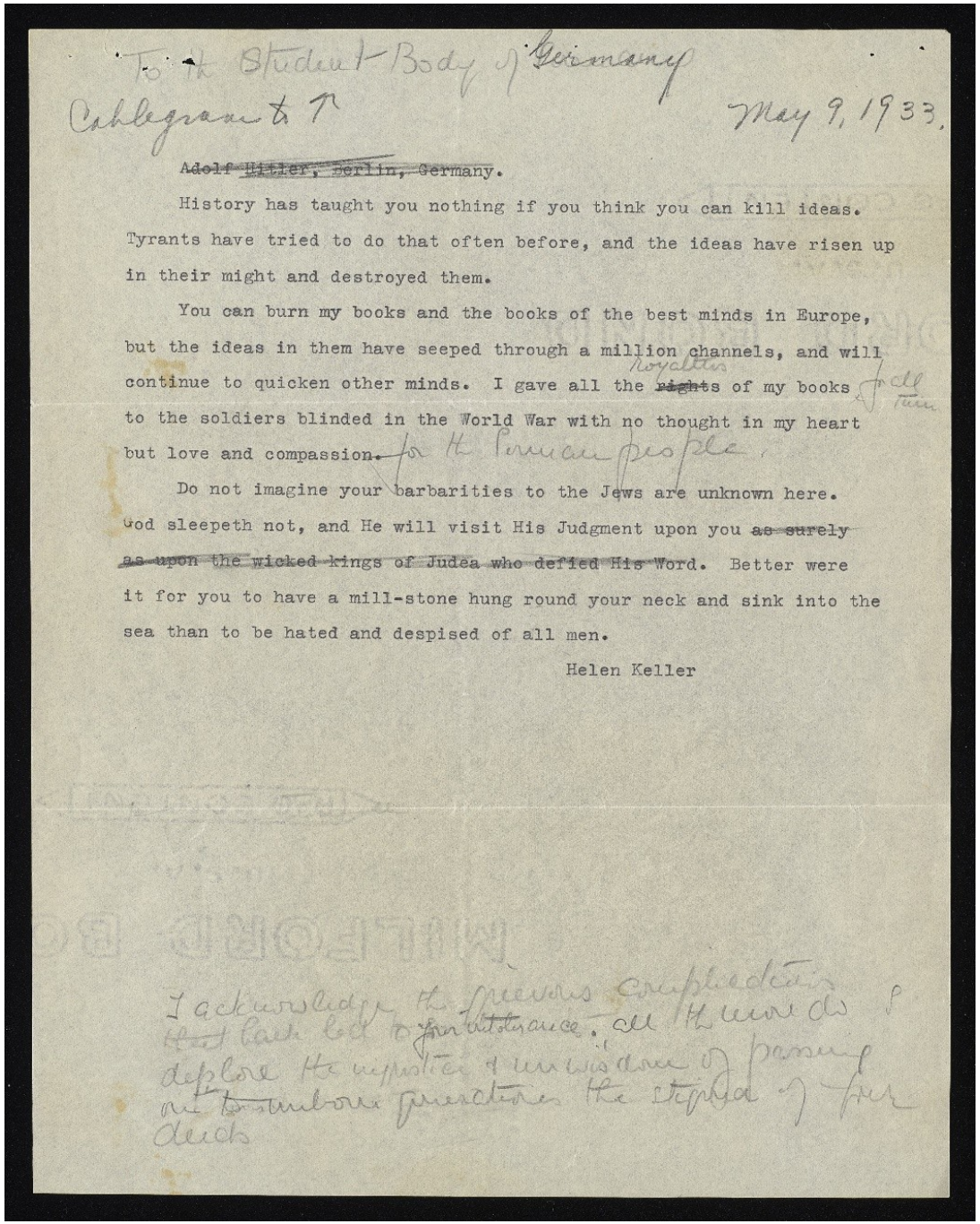
FREEDOM OF SPEECH

Freedom of the Press

Anglo-American Press Association, Paris, c. 1948-1950

“History has taught you nothing if you think you can kill ideas.”

Letter to the Student Body of Germany, May 9, 1933



To the Student Body of Germany
Cablegram to ?
May 9, 1933.

~~Adolf Hitler, Berlin, Germany.~~

History has taught you nothing if you think you can kill ideas. Tyrants have tried to do that often before, and the ideas have risen up in their might and destroyed them.

You can burn my books and the books of the best minds in Europe, but the ideas in them have seeped through a million channels, and will continue to quicken other minds. I gave all the ~~rights~~ royalties of my books to the soldiers blinded in the World War with no thought in my heart but love and compassion. to the German people.

Do not imagine your barbarities to the Jews are unknown here. God sleepeth not, and He will visit His Judgment upon you ~~as surely as upon the wicked kings of Judea who defied His Word~~. Better were it for you to have a mill-stone hung round your neck and sink into the sea than to be hated and despised of all men.

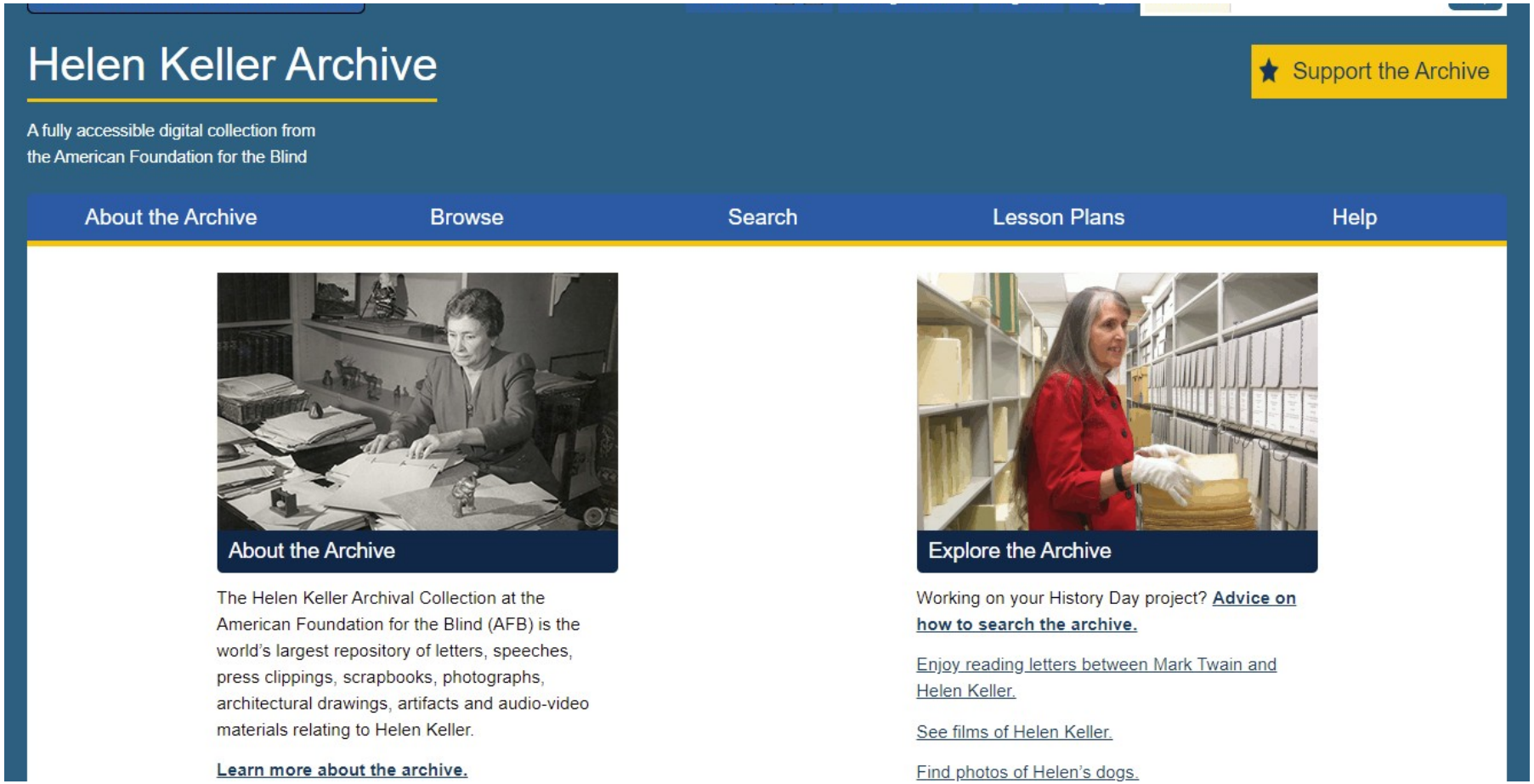
Helen Keller

I acknowledge the grievous crucifixion that has befallen my fellow countrymen. All the more do I deplore the injustice and unwisdom of passing on innocent generations the stigma of their deeds

Helen in Martha’s Vineyard, MA. 1961

“Never bend your head. Always hold it high. Look the world straight in the face.”

Courtesy of Perkins School for the Blind Archives.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A fully accessible digital collection from the American Foundation for the Blind
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About the Archive
The Helen Keller Archival Collection at the American Foundation for the Blind (AFB) is the world's largest repository of letters, speeches, press clippings, scrapbooks, photographs, architectural drawings, artifacts and audio-video materials relating to Helen Keller.
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Explore the Archive
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Enjoy reading letters between Mark Twain and Helen Keller.
See films of Helen Keller.
Find photos of Helen's dogs.

https://www.afb.org/HelenKellerArchive

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